

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, December 18, 2011 3:16 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Israel seeks builders for over 1,000 settler homes (Reuters)

From: OpsNewsTicker
Sent: Sunday, December 18, 2011 03:12 PM
To: NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: SES-O
Subject: Israel seeks builders for over 1,000 settler homes (Reuters)

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Israel began seeking tenders to build more than 1,000 homes in the occupied West Bank on Sunday, part of a settlement plan it accelerated after Palestinians won recognition by a U.N. body, but a move which complicates a return to negotiations.

Palestinians have conditioned a return to peace talks on a freeze to settlement building. Peace talks collapsed a year ago over the settlements issue and the Palestinians have since sought recognition for statehood from the United Nations.

Last month, the day after Palestinians won recognition from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Jewish state announced it was speeding up settlement building activity.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for the accelerated construction of some 2,000 housing units in settlements that Israel has said it intends to keep as part of any future peace deal with the Palestinians.

The Housing Ministry statement on Sunday said it was marketing land for 500 homes in Har Homa, 348 in Betar Illit and 180 in Givat Zeev.

Betar Illit and Givat Zeev are settlements in the occupied West Bank near Jerusalem. Har Homa, bordering Bethlehem, is situated in a part of the West Bank that Israel annexed to Jerusalem after it captured the eastern part of the city in a 1967 war.

In an interview with Army Radio, Housing Minister Ariel Atias said the bidding process was part of the plan to build 2,000 housing units announced in November.

"It's the same, recycled headline from a month and a half ago," Atias said. "Some (approvals) went out last month, the next are going out now."

Most countries consider settlements Israel has built in the West Bank illegal. Israel disputes this, citing historical and biblical links to the area, which it calls Judea and Samaria.

Palestinians, who seek to establish a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, say settlement expansion will deny them a viable country.

Israel says negotiations should resume without preconditions and that most of its settlement construction

takes place in areas it intends to keep in any future peace deal.

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